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Marcos Insists He and His Regime Are Strong

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MANILA — Is the Philippines heading for civil war under an unpopular leader whose health is so bad that he may not live two more years? The United States appears to believe so and is deeply worried about the effects on its strategic interests in the Far East.

President Ferdinand E. Marcos has gone to some lengths lately to deny that Washington's perception is accurate. For one thing, he has staged media events. To challenge assertions that he had only a 50-50 chance of living until elections in 1987, the President went out on the lawn to swing a golf club a couple of times. Pictures of him following through, right knee gracefully bent, duly appeared in local and foreign newspapers — though a spokesman insisted that the cameras were there only by chance — and the 68-year-old Mr. Marcos was pleased.

To emphasize their contention that the Communist rebels are surrendering and not the growing threat Washington sees, Government officials took reporters to the southern town of Dipolog, where they were shown a ceremonial pledge of allegiance by 3,000 villagers and the formal surrender of 45 armed rebels. The pledge of allegiance was the same one recited daily by Filipino children in school.

The official Philippine press agency described the event as "virtually confirming" Mr. Marcos's contention that the insurgents are "surrendering in droves." But the Pentagon estimates the insurgents' New People's Army at 16,500, with many more active supporters, and rebel units are reported to be operating in all provinces. Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, the State and Defense Departments declared that while this army was not close to toppling Mr. Marcos, it could become strong enough to produce a military stalemate and "civil war on a massive scale" in as little as three years.

Again the President had a rebuttal. In a long interview last week, he said he could end the insurgency within a year provided he received the proper financial aid from the United States. Washington has been holding back in an effort to force Mr. Marcos to clean up his Government, reshape the military and end the strong-arm tactics, corruption and favoritism that have alienated so many political groups and driven thousands of Filipinos to the rebel side.

A Soviet Threat?

But a report circulating in the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence pointed up a dilemma. It said the Soviet Union had beefed up the embassy in Manila and had made indirect contacts with the insurgents in apparent preparation for giving arms and other supplies to what has been a home-grown and largely self-supporting rebel movement.

The Government said last week that during a visit to Moscow, the President's wife, Imelda, had been assured by the Soviet President, Andrei A. Gromyko, that the Soviet Union would not back the insurgency.

Mr. Marcos is incapable of making the necessary reforms and should step down, said the intelligence committee chairman, Senator Dave Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota. Mr. Durenberger spoke after the committee's staff declared that the Philippines had less than three years to change things before unrest and rebellion brought down the Government.

"We're trying to raise the noise level from the United States," the Senator said earlier. The response within the ornate chambers of Mr. Marcos's Malacanang Palace seems to be to fight noise with noise in the hope, perhaps, that once the fuss dies down, Washington's attention will move on to other things.

During the interview, Mr. Marcos frequently referred to his long years in power and the ups and downs of Filipino history he has seen. Insurgencies have come and gone, he noted, and so have American campaigns for reform. Through it all, he has followed his own political instincts and held on to power for 20 years.

But neither Washington nor his opposition at home believes he can rule much longer as he has so far. In Manila, anti-Government protesters, who find themselves and their opinions excluded from the President's tight circle of decision-makers, sometimes resort to what is known as a noise barrage. At a designated hour all across town, people honk their horns, bang pots and pans, set off firecrackers, blow on paper party horns and simply shout at the top of their voices.

Malacanang Palace practices a simple defense against this tactic. It closes its doors and waits until the noise is over. The trouble is that the clamor goes on, and behind it the considerably more deadly sound of guns seems to be getting louder.